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ABSTRACT

In order to get some idea of how 18- to 25-year-olds felt about some of their reading moments in school, a reading interest survey was given to 189 college students at the University of Wisconsin, LaCrosse. Females reacted more positvely to questions about the impact of teachers, home life, and methods on their feelings for reading. Oral reading was disliked by these students when they were in elementary school, and assigned readings were disliked most in high school. The factor listed most often as influencing the development of a real love of reading was caring teachers who were models of reading to their classes, and whose love for reading was apparent. Recommendations based on the survey include: (1) reading materials need to be interesting and life-like; (2) reading groups should be modified and possibly changed frequently enough so that a student is not stigmatized; (3) oral reading should be carefully watched and purposefully used; (4) an attempt should be made to promote reading in the home; (5) teachers must care about students and show that they care; and (6) teachers need to be models of reading. (The survey results and a list of books that left a lasting impression on the students are attached.) (RS)

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College Students' Views of Reading

Robert L. Nelson, Ph.D.

Eighth Great Lakes Regional Conference
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To get us in the proper mood I would like to start with a little story by Stephen King.[1] It is really related to what I'd like to share with you today.

Okay, this is a science-fiction joke.

It seems like in 1995 or so the pollution in the atmosphere of London has started to kill off all the rooks. And the city government is very concerned because the rooks roosting on the cornices and the odd little crannies of the public buildings are a big attraction. The Yanks with their Kodaks, if you get it. So they say, "What are we going to do?"

They get a lot of brochures from places with climates similar to London so they can raise the rooks until the pollution problem is finally licked. One place with a similar climate, but low pollution count, turns out to be Bangor, Maine. So they put an ad in the paper soliciting bird fanciers and talk to a bunch of guys in the trade. Finally, they engage this one guy at the rate of $50,000 a year to raise rooks. They send an ornithologist over on the Concorde with two cases of rook eggs packed in these shatterproof cases -- they keep the shipping compartment constantly heated and all that stuff.

So this guy has a new business -- North American Rook Farms, Inc. He goes to work right off incubating new rooks so London will not become a rookless city. The only thing is, the London City Council is really impatient, and every day they send him a telegram that says, "Bred Any Good Rooks Lately?"

Donald Hall[2] claims King had it mixed up. He said:

Here where we live in New Hampshire, the little creeks roll down Ragged Mountain across our fields, squirt under Route 4, and piddle into our hayfields on the other side. My wife spends all fall and much of the spring working on borders to these little springs, planting bulbs, fertilizing, and then keeping the borders clear and clean, because if there's anything she likes, it's to "weed a good brook."

Have you read any good books lately? I hope so. If we expect our students to read, we must read Francis E. Kazemek put it so clearly in the October issue of the "Journal of Reading" when he stated:

"After attending reading conferences I often wonder when academics and teachers involved in reading education last read a book of contemporary poetry, or an essay by Lewis Thomas, or one of Barbara Tuchman's histories, or a novel by Dickens, or a copy of "Rolling Stone" magazine, or a "Spiderman" comic book. Usually, I am dismayed over the narrow range of presentations, examples, and discussion."[3]

He goes on to say:

"Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) and individualized reading programs in which students select their own materials are absolutely necessary; however, doesn't the teacher's role as guide and star-shower go beyond these? Doesn't the teacher have a responsibility to at least familiarize students with possible directions, possible guiding lights, and possible ways of setting forth? I would like to think so."[4]

Maybe we're getting to this point. Before giving the results of my study with college students let me briefly share what a recent study conducted for the American Library Association found out. The survey was done with 500 children at 10 suburban malls around the country. It must be remembered that this was completed in suburban malls, certainly not representative of the very diverse population of this country.

Anyway, half the children surveyed, ages 6 to 10, said they "really like to read" and 42% said they "sort of" like to read. According to the study, 62.4% of the children said a kid who reads a lot "learns things in school more quickly," while 18.8% said such kids were called "nerds or geeks." In fact 18% said children who did not enjoy reading were likely to be called such names.

Reading came in fifth of 12 activities when children were asked their favorite things to do, finishing behind playing with friends, outdoor sports, bicycling, and guess what -- television.

So there is hope.

There are three major things I would now like to share with you concerning feelings about reading as expressed by college students.

1. I'll give the results of the Reading Interest Survey that I gave to 189 of my former college students at the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse.

2. I'd like to share some of the actual comments made by my students.

3. Based upon the findings I'd like to make some recommendations that all of us as reading people could heed.

Today it seems that there are so many experts in the country constantly telling us what is wrong with our schools and with reading in particular. I guess that the concern shown is great, but what bothers me is that many of the experts from the President of the United States to the professors in our Ivory Universities are so removed from the real life of the classroom that I truly wonder about some of the findings. Anyway, I decided to go to the consumers of education, the students. Shouldn't they have some remembrances of their school reading experiences? Don't you? Hence, this survey. I wanted to get some idea how these 18-25 year olds felt about some of their reading moments in school.

Let's look at the results.

The results for the first seven questions are interesting. For six of the seven questions the females had a higher score. This really backs up what we generally know, that female students usually have more positive feelings about reading. They also seemed to react more

positively about how teachers, home life, and methods had on feelings for reading. Only when it came to the materials being read did the males score as high as the females.

Question 8 gave some strong results. The thing liked least in elementary school reading appeared to be oral reading, with 47 students listing it. Reading groups came in second with 40, the books third with 34, workbooks fourth with 29, and phonics lessons fifth with 22. Note how well free reading and library visits did. Differences in male and female scores were not great at all.

Question 9 regarded reading in high school. A whopping 95 disliked assigned readings, followed by 51 for oral reading in class, teachers' attitudes came in third with 22, and worksheets fourth with 16. Again free reading and library reading did well and there was little difference in the male and female scores.

For question 10, textbook reading was liked the least with 74 checks, interpretations of readings had 39, poetry 34, lack of free reading 29. Again the mail and female reading totals were close except for lack of free reading time. This appeared to bother the females much more than the males. In light of what we know regarding males and females regarding reading this is understandable.

Question 11 is very revealing. The factor listed most often for developing a real love for reading was caring teachers who model reading and read to classes, with 62 students listing this.

Second was family members who read with 35, third materials at home with 30, books in classrooms had 25 as did free reading in schools. Note that phonics instruction received 2 votes, and oral reading 9. Females seemed to realize the value of family members who read more strongly than did the males.

For the 12th and final question the students were asked to name any one or two books that they had read in their lives that left a lasting impression on them. This was strictly "off the top of the head" recall. No hints of any kind were given.

Which book do you think was named most often? It was To Kill A Mockingbird which was listed 12 times, 6 by females, 6 by males. What about no. 2? Huckleberry Finn was named 7 times, 3 by females and 4 by males. The handout will give you the complete tabulation of all the books mentioned more than once. It is obvious from the list and the top vote getters that many of the books listed were those assigned in some English or Reading class. By the way, 197 different titles were listed.

Before making any implications from the above data I would like to go on to my second major point and share a few exact quotes that some of my students made regarding reading and the school process.

1. I think the teachers I had that were good thought more of the students personally than just the job of teaching and cramming facts into our heads. They made the class better by just treating us as human beings and not just "students." This helped me learn better. These good teachers always knew what you were thinking or what your problems or hangups were about school. They understood you.

2. My first grade teacher had a negative impact on my reading. She was very strict. I hated to ask for help because she was so strict.

3. Good teachers do not pass judgments on students on the first day of class. They accept the students as they are and offer everything they have to the student. They make sure that the material they teach is worth teaching. They teach every day in a friendly manner.

4. A caring teacher by far would be the most important quality. If the teacher has feelings for his/her students you have gained trust, and basically all these other qualities above because a caring teacher shines.

5. Caring -- if a teacher doesn't care whether he/she is at school, or if the students like him/her, or if they are even getting anything out of the class then he/she is one terrible teacher.

6. The perfect teacher would be impossible. But a teacher who cares is a blessing. It gets the student to try a little harder just because you care. If the teacher doesn't care the student won't care.

7. I think that it is important to have a good teacher-student relationship. I find that when I get along well with a teacher I have more incentive to learn. It's more relaxing, and there's less tension when students and teachers trust in each other, when they care, and when they can talk freely.

8. I look for a teacher who can first of all explain things well. Then one that will go out of his way to help students who need it, and finally one who can make a class relaxing.\

9. I think there is only one thing that I look for in a teacher. That is that he judges me on the work I do, not how I dress or how long my hair is. I don't think it is right that the teacher hands out all kinds of work for the student and then sits at his desk and does nothing.

10. A good teacher is not necessarily one who doesn't give tests. Judging a teacher is judging their character.

A good teacher puts trust into his students.

A good teacher loves his work.

A good teacher is understanding of a student's feelings.

A good teacher works hard to see each student as an individual.

11. It has been the only class that I really enjoyed. There was always a warm and cheerful feeling in this room. I feel the class was very beneficial. I was able to learn and enjoy myself while I was learning.

12. Thank you, Mr. Nelson, for all the things you've done for us. We want to let you know how much we appreciate your willingness to help us and your true concern for each of us as individuals. Above the things you have done for us, we especially appreciate all those things you have not done. You have not crowded us, you've given us room to breath. In allowing us this freedom, you have given us a chance to discover and meet our own educational goals for the first time in our lives. Mr. Nelson, you have allowed us to find a reason for learning. What better tribute can we pay to anyone? We pray that God will give you the strength to continue the excellent work you've been doing. We are going to miss you very much. Thank you for caring.

Finally, based on what I shared with you concerning the results of my survey and the comments of former students, I'd like to consider some possible recommendations that all of us as teachers, and especially teachers of reading, could consider.

First, it appears that college students really understand the importance of the materials used to teach reading. I believe we have come to realize this more in the past few years partly due to research completed in this area. The materials need to be interesting and life-like. No more "Nat sat on the fat cat," but better literature is needed.

Second, reading groups should be modified and possibly often changed so a student isn't stigmatized as a buzzard instead of a cardinal.

Third, oral reading should be carefully watched and purposefully used. Reading around the room, seat after seat, needs to be discouraged. Hurtful remarks must be eliminated.

Fourth, textbooks and other books need not be chewed into little pieces, swallowed, then regurgitated. Emphasis should be placed on highlights and big ideas, and critical evaluation.

Fifth, there needs to be great freedom of selection to read in every classroom in addition to any required reading. Many books, magazines and newspapers of all types should be available. Even poetry should be available and positively presented.

Sixth, time must be allowed for reading in school and possibly free reading could be assigned as homework.

Seventh, there should not be an over-emphasis on phonics, just to complete a workbook for example.

Eighth, an attempt should be made to promote reading in the home. This could be difficult of course, but home calls and parent-teacher conferences could emphasize this. The every day value of reading needs to be shown to students.

Ninth, above all teachers need to be models of reading. They need to read to students at all levels daily. They need to show a love for reading.

Tenth, teachers must care about students and show that they care. Sarcasm and meanness are completely out of place.

Eleventh, all students needed to be treated as individuals and respected as such.

Twelfth and last, put some humor into the classroom. Tell a joke-for example, here's one I just heard -- "Have you heard about the three old men walking down the street?"

One of them said, "Windy isn't it?"

Another said, "No, I think it's Thursday."

The third man said, "I am too. Let's go get a drink."

Or how about the excuse one teacher received upon a student's return to class?

"Please excuse Chris's absence on Friday afternoon. I took him golfing with me. Chris shot an 86. I shot 92. Chris will not be absent to play golf again."

One more -- An old lady was walking down the street with no clothes on. Her neighbor turned to his wife and said, "I just say Mrs. Jones go by." His wife said, "What was she wearing?" He said, "Darned if I know, but whatever it was, it sure needed ironing."

So smile and laugh. Laughing is good for you. Don't you feel good when you laugh? Don't your worries disappear even if but for a moment?

Research is showing more and more that laughter is good for you mentally, emotionally, and physically. Shouldn't our schoolrooms be happy places? Shouldn't our students be able to laugh, not at someone, but with someone?

So remember, read, care, and smile!

Footnotes

[1] Charton, James. (Gatherer) (1986) Bred Any Good Books Lately? New York: Doubleday and Company Inc.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Kazemek, Francis E. (1989) "Navigating With Books." Journal of Reading, 33, 5.

[4] Ibid.

Results of the Survey Administered to 189 College Students
at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
During the 1988-89 School Year

READING INTEREST SURVEY

Male_____ Female_____ Age_____ Fr. Soph. Junior Senior
(Circle one)

Rate questions 1-7 on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being least favorable; 5 most favorable)

1. Rate your feelings about reading in elementary school. 1 2 3 4 5

   All 3.4 Female 3.7 Male 3.0

2. Rate your feelings about reading in high school. 1 2 3 4 5

   All 3.3 Female 3.5 Male 2.9

3. Rate your feelings about reading in college. 1 2 3 4 5

   All 3.4 Female 3.5 Male 3.4

4. Rate what effect you believe your teachers had on your feelings for reading. 1 2 3 4 5

   All 3.4 Female 3.5 Male 3.3

5. Rate what effect you believe your home life had on your feelings for reading. 1 2 3 4 5

   All 3.6 Female 3.8 Male 3.3

6. Rate what effect you believe the way you learned to read had on your feelings for reading. 1 2 3 4 5

   All 3.5 Female 3.6 Male 3.3

7. Rate what effect you believe the materials that you read had on your feelings for reading. 1 2 3 4 5

   All 3.8 Female 3.8 Male 3.8

Circle the answer that best fits for questions 8-11.

8. What did you like least about reading in elementary school?

		All	Female	Male
a.	the reading tests	34	16	18
b.	the teacher's attitude	11	7	4
c.	reading groups	40	26	14
d.	phonics lessons	22	15	7
e.	workbooks	29	12	17
f.	worksheets	9	5	4
g.	free reading	4	3	1
h.	library visits	4	3	1
i.	oral reading	47	23	24
j.	other (name it)	8	3	5

9. What did you like least about reading in high school?

		All	Female	Male
a.	assigned readings	95	47	48
b.	reading orally in class	51	27	24
c.	worksheets	16	10	6
d.	teachers' attitudes	22	11	11
e.	free reading	2	2	0
f.	library facilities	6	4	2
g.	other (name)	9	6	3

10. What do you like least about reading in college?

		All	Female	Male
a.	assigned readings	24	14	10
b.	interpretations	39	23	16
c.	poetry and its meanings	34	19	15
d.	textbook reading	74	32	42
e.	instructor attitudes	10	5	5
f.	lack of free reading	29	24	5
g.	library facilities	2	2	0
h.	other (name)	6	3	3

11. What do you believe is the most important factor in developing a real love for reading?

		All	Female	Male
a.	Family members who read	35	23	12
b.	materials at home for reading	30	16	14
c.	Caring teachers who model reading and read to classes	62	38	24
d.	Lots of good books in classrooms	25	13	12
e.	Good phonics instruction	2	1	1

f.	Free reading in schools	25	17	8
g.	Well supplied libraries	7	2	5
h.	Stress on good oral reading	9	2	7
i.	Other (name)	19	6	13

12. Name one or two books that you have read that have left a lasting impression on you and your life.

Results of the Question Asked 189 College Students (102 female - 87 male)

"Name On or Two Books That You Have Read That Have Left a Lasting Impression On You and Your Life"

BOOK TITLES	All Students	Female	Male
To Kill a Mockingbird	12	6	6
Huckleberry Finn	7	3	4
Catcher in the Rye	6	3	3
Tom Sawyer	6	3	3
Lord of the Flies	6	0	6
Flowers in the Attic	5	5	0
Grapes of Wrath	4	4	0
Go Ask Alice	4	4	0
Of Mice and Men	4	4	0
The Outsiders	4	0	4
One Child	3	3	0
Great Expectations	3	0	3
Mc'Mahon	3	0	3
The Hobbit	3	0	3
The Old Man and the Sea	3	0	3
Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl	3	3	0
Trump: the Art of the Deal	3	0	3
Where the Red Fern Grows	3	0	3
Power of Positive Thinking	2	2	0
Scarlet Letter	2	2	0
All Quiet on the Western Front	2	2	0
A Separate Peace	2	2	0
East of Eden	2	2	0
Gone With the Wind	2	2	0
Love	2	2	0
Loving Each Other	2	2	0
Great Gatsby	2	0	2
Call of the Wild	2	0	2
Megatrends	2	0	2
Old Yeller	2	0	2
The Boz: Modern Day Anti-Hero	2	0	2
Native Son	2	1	1
1984	2	1	1
The Jungle	2	1	1
For Whom the Bell Tolls	2	1	1
Helter Skelter	2	1	1

University of Wisconsin - La Crosse
Robert L. Nelson, Ph.D.
1988 - 89 School Year